

Austerity-hit Europeans fear Merkel poll win

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Across southern Europe, people hardest hit by towering unemployment rates and savage spending cuts view the prospect of German Chancellor Angela Merkel winning re-election this weekend with a sense of foreboding.

For many in Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy, Merkel has come to symbolise an austerity regime that slashed health and education spending and sent jobless rates spiralling to 27.9 percent in Greece, 26.26 percent in Spain, 16.4 percent in Portugal and 12.0 percent in Italy.

When Merkel visited Athens last October, she was greeted by protests at which banners declared: "No to the Fourth Reich." Some even displayed the Nazi swastika. A month later in Lisbon demonstrators greeted her with signs that read: "Angela Merkel murderer."

Merkel is set for re-election as Germany's leader in Sunday's general elections, polls show, but it is unclear whether her pro-austerity centre-right coalition can rule alone.

Depending on the outcome, she may have to create a grand coalition with her main rivals, the left-leaning Social Democrats, who favour relaxing Merkel's strict fiscal policies in Europe.

If Greeks, Portuguese, Italians and Spaniards had a vote in the Germany elections, Merkel's fortunes might be different.

Despite his Spanish nationality, Daniel Correa, a 33-year-old coordinator in Madrid for the pan-European civic platform Citizens For Europe, is taking measures to have a say in the outcome in Germany.

He is taking advantage of an "Electoral Rebellion" by German grassroots group Equality Now, in which about some 50 German voters have agreed to cast their ballots for parties chosen by non-Germans, in protest, they say, at a lack of democracy. Organisers said the initiative sparked interest across southern Europe.

Under the scheme, Correa arranged for a German voter to cast her ballot for a left-wing party in Germany's general election.

"There needs to be a change. Germany imposes austerity measures because it wants to recoup the money it has loaned. It treats other nations as its subjects, not like part of a team," Correa said at his central Madrid office.

Merkel has argued that belt-tightening is the only way to ensure sustainable economic growth and avoid the type of policies that touched off the crippling debt crisis.

She has slightly softened her tone during the election campaign, offering German job creation assistance to countries such as Spain and acknowledging that stricken nations like Greece may need more time to pay off their debts.

Fears that a Merkel re-election will lead to more German-ordained austerity are perhaps deepest in Greece and Portugal, both subject to strict fiscal conditions in return for multi-billion euro international bailouts.

"Merkel's re-election will further punish the working class, workers and pensioners, so it will deepen poverty," said Christos Aefantis, the editor of "Shedia", Greece's first magazine sold by homeless people which was launched in Athens in February.

"The austerity policies that have been followed are not the solution, they deprive a large part of the population of hope that things will change."

There is a similar sentiment in Lisbon where Marisa Maria, a European Union lawmaker from Portugal's far-left Left Block said that with a Merkel win "we know already that austerity will continue and European policies will not change very much".

'Spaniards do not want Merkel to win'

In Spain, Merkel's standing has slumped. In a survey of Spaniards' assessments of 10 global leaders, Merkel has dropped from the number-two spot after US President Barack Obama in 2009 to the number seven position, ahead only of Russia's Vladimir Putin, Argentina's Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner and Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro.

"There has never been such a huge drop in the ranking of a leader in Spain before. It is very significant," said Javier Noya, the main researcher at Spanish think tank Elcano Royal Institute, which carries out the thrice-yearly survey.

"Spaniards do not want Merkel to win, of course, although they do not know what the alternatives are," Noya said.

Some Europeans held out hope for a softening in Germany's economic policies even under Merkel.

Nuno Melo, a European lawmaker with the conservative Popular Party, the junior partner in the Portugal's governing coalition, said he had faith that Merkel would accept a shift in her economic policy "in favour of jobs and economic growth".

"These themes have been on the sidelines of German political discourse now because they do not provide an election payoff," he said. But others were more wary.

Even under a "grand coalition" government, a Merkel victory would mean "generalised austerity, mistrust towards Europe and a jealous defence of national interests," wrote Maurizio Ricci in Italian centre-left daily newspaper La Repubblica.

"Merkel's dominance even in a 'grand coalition' means that existing policies would not change since she will insist on austerity," added Yannis Panagopoulos, the leader of Greece's biggest labour union GSEE.

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